

# Customer Aren't Always Right

## Sometimes You Have to Risk Letting Them Go

The customer is always right. That is the mantra of businesses throughout the world and has been for many years. But we all know it isn't true. There are some customers out there who will try to get something for nothing, who will take advantage of your attempts to satisfy them, and who will always demand more than you are able to give. Given that, you have to be realistic and realize that all you can do is your best. And, in some cases, you might even have to let that customer go.

Let me give you an example: A customer books a flight to Cancun with his family. They arrive at the airport 30 minutes before the flight is scheduled to depart—and one of the family members has a passport that has expired. Now, not only have they missed their flight, the family member with the expired passport would not have been allowed to fly, even if they had arrived on time. How would you handle this situation?

I know what I would be thinking; Why didn't you set your alarm and get here in time to make your flight? Why didn't you check your passports to make sure they were valid? And why are you now swearing at me and throwing a fit in public, blaming me for what I couldn't control?

But, of course, in the name of customer service, I can't share those thoughts. All I can do is work with what I have. That would involve directing the passengers to the nearest passport office that offers same-day service, and rebooking them—at no extra charge—for the next available flight.

A friend, who works for an airline, tells me that more often than not those passengers still would not be satisfied. They would ask who was going to pay for the night they would be not be staying at the hotel in Cancun. They would, in fact, act like victims rather than taking responsibility for the

situation. And that, unfortunately, is how many customers respond when faced with a product or service that, in their opinion, does not meet their expectations, whether they have purchased tickets or tires, printing or paint.

So, what should you do? How should you react? Even if you know the customer is wrong, you must treat him as if he were right. And that means taking these steps:

- **Don't get defensive.** Often, the customer is so frustrated and upset that she wants to blame anyone but herself for the problem and will do whatever she can to ensure that you become equally frustrated and upset. Resist the urge to get defensive. Instead, focus on explaining the situation and the best options to deal with it.
- **Empathize.** Show sincere concern. Nothing will diffuse a volatile situation better than empathy. You're probably thinking this is easier said than done but, when you realize that a complaint is a request for help and not a reflection on you personally, it will make empathy a more attainable goal. You might say, "I know how frustrated you are, and I will do whatever it takes to solve your problem."
- **Apologize and empathize.** There is power in the words "I'm sorry." Don't let your ego get in the way by blaming the customer, or other employees, for the problem. Accept responsibility for it on behalf of the company and become the customer's advocate in rectifying the situation. And show sincere concern. Nothing will diffuse a volatile situation better than empathy.
- **Ask questions.** Asking questions not only clarifies the problem, it pulls the customer

out of the irate stage and gives them time to cool down.

- **Stay calm.** Don't get pulled into a shouting match. If you feel yourself losing control step away for a minute.
- **Don't let the customer intimidate you.** Some customers will continue to insist that you give them something, even though you and your company are not at fault for the problem. Politely, but firmly, inform the customer that you are sorry, but you cannot give him what he is asking for, and don't be surprised when he says he will never do business with you again.

Going back to my friend the airline employee, she tells me it is not uncommon for a passenger to say he will never again fly that airline and then, lo and behold, here he comes two months later—on time and ready to board his flight. What drew him back? Chances are that, once he calmed down, he realized it was his fault for missing his earlier flight and, because this particular airline has very competitive prices and attractive destinations, he couldn't resist doing business with it.

The reality is that there are people out there who will do everything they can to take advantage of you. Those are not the customers that will help you grow your business; you might have to let them go. **RO**

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